

CODESRIA

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Note to the Community

The Council's 2017–2021 Strategic Cycle is behind us. In this period, the Council made significant milestones as demonstrated in the Sida-

supported Evaluation Report of the cycle, published in December 2021. The cycle was marked by a reform initiative mandated by the Executive Committee. Some of

the key challenges the Council had experienced were addressed, leading to more efficient systems, especially those designed to engage the community at the research, training and publication levels. The Secretariat prioritised internal reforms and worked tirelessly to address a backlog of publications, to improve the framework for mobilising research, and revitalised the dissemination and communications systems in order to better project the Council's work to the community. These developments have led to a significant shift at CODESRIA, which has created space for African scholars to engage with the Council more efficiently and effectively.

Under normal circumstances, the Council would have commenced a new strategic and programmatic cycle from March 2022. This has not been the case. This note serves to update the community on the state of the Council.

On 15 December 2020, the Council received communication from its core funding partner, Sida, that a former member of staff had raised a complaint with them regarding unpaid provident fund benefits. This matter goes back to the 2012–2016 strategic planning cycle, when the Council was under the leadership of the immediate

In this Issue / Dans ce numéro

Note to the Community

Godwin R. Murunga 1

Note à la communauté

Godwin R. Murunga 5

1. *Africa Is on the Move*

Vijay Prashad 9

On the Russia–Ukraine War

2. *European War and Global South Perspectives*

Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatshen 15

3. *Putin's Ukraine Aggression*

Siba N'Zatioula Grovogui 25

Invalidating African Studies?

4. *(In)Validating Crises in African Studies: Certain Reflections on Disciplinary Stagnancy*

K. René Odanga 41

5. *'Crisis? What Crisis?' A Response to René Odanga's Missive on African Studies*

Chambi Chachage 50

6. *Post-continentalism: An appreciative response to René Odanga*

David Mills 54

On that 'Sub-Saharan Africa' Contraption

7. *Whither 'Sub-Saharan Africa' Can We Use the Compass Instead?*

Lusajo Kajula and Chambi Chachage 57



This Bulletin is distributed free to all social research institutes and faculties in Africa and beyond to encourage research co-operation among African scholars. Interested individuals and institutions may also subscribe to CODESRIA mailing list to receive the Bulletin promptly upon release. Contributions on theoretical matters and reports on conferences and seminars are also welcome.

former Executive Secretary. Apparently, these funds were never secured separately or ring-fenced so that staff would be paid promptly upon completion of service, as has been the case throughout the history of the Council except 2016. The matter was captured in several Audit Reports before 2016 and is clear in the handover report shared in June 2017. The complaint prompted an initial investigation from a Sida controller, which subsequently mutated into two major forensic audits of the Council.

Sida formally notified CODESRIA on 20 April 2021 of its intention to undertake a special study (audit) to understand what had happened to the unpaid benefits to staff who departed the service of the Council in 2015–2016. The notification caused two significant developments in CODESRIA in relation to its programmes. First, Sida halted signing an agreement for a major humanities intervention in the Sahel that CODESRIA and the Arab Council for the Social Sciences had jointly negotiated. The intervention was due to commence from January 2021, with only the signature to the agreement pending. Second, the audit led to a restriction on the disbursement of committed funds to CODESRIA in the context of the 2017–2021 strategic plan. Coupled with the uncertainties that had been wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic, these developments adversely affected programme implementation at the Council, halting preparations to transition to the new cycle, and forced a postponement of many activities, including the 16th General Assembly.

Sida appointed Ernst & Young (EY) Stockholm to undertake the audit. The audit commenced on 30 June 2021 and on 27 August 2021 Sida shared the report of the audit with CODESRIA. The report did not find any cases of fraud or corruption, but in the overall instrument against which the auditors assessed the Council, they expressed reservations that they had been unable to access some documents for the 2012–2016 strategic cycle, and therefore concluded that there remained a suspicion of fraud. Thus, after review and internal discussion, Sida decided that that audit was inconclusive. On 2 November 2021, they notified CODESRIA of the decision to conduct an expanded special study (in essence, a forensic audit) of the internal controls at CODESRIA. This study would revisit the issue of unpaid provident funds but would also be expanded to assess internal controls at CODESRIA up to 2022. Key to the terms of reference was a requirement that auditors assess CODESRIA's compliance with the terms of its Agreement with Sida.

EY was again retained for this second audit. The opening meeting was convened on 13 December 2021, this also being the same day that fieldwork for the forensic audit commenced. This fieldwork went on into the first quarter of 2022. Sida shared the report of this second audit with CODESRIA on 7 April 2022. Overall, on the specific parameters against which the Council was audited, the findings returned evidence of a low or moderate risk except for a few cases regarding activities undertaken in the 2012–2016 cycle, which were judged of high risk. The report concluded that it did not find any cases of fraud, corruption or conflict of interest in the affairs of the Council for the period 2017 to 2022. There were some weaknesses with internal controls but none was alarming. However, on the matter of unpaid provident funds and severance pay of the 2012–2016 period, the report concluded thus:

The analysis of expenditures related to the period 2014–2016 revealed several financial management weaknesses. [...] Based on above, there is a risk that irregularities and misuse of funds have occurred. However, due to the limitations that we have encountered throughout the review, we cannot perform sufficient analyses in order to reach a firm conclusion. Due to improper financial records CODESRIA have acted in non-compliance with the agreement with Sida, (refer to article 9 of the agreement). As a final remark, we have not identified any fraud. To summarise, we would categorise our conclusion in accordance with the following definition from the ToR: Non-compliance with agreement with Sida without suspicions of fraud, e.g., poor quality of supporting documentation and lack of supporting documentation. Besides flaws and errors, no suspected fraud. [...] Based on CODESRIA's lack of knowledge about the Lucie system and lack of supporting documents we do not have enough information to conclude whether irregularities have occurred or not. Even if we would receive additional information from Lucie it is questionable whether EY would be able to draw any precise conclusions on the activities from the period 2014–2016.

Lucie is the accounting system the Council used until 2017. However, the system became obsolete and its capacity to hold accounting data was limited. The software was retired in 2018 but secured safely in the Council's servers and is retrieved only with written authorisation.

The audit process concluded on 23 June 2022, when Sida formally notified CODESRIA of its decisions after the audit. Subsequently, Sida also addressed a let-

ter to the President of the Council, dated 2 July 2022, from which the above quote is extracted. It was agreed at this meeting with Sida and captured in the letter to the President, that we close investigations and work on revitalising the internal controls at CODESRIA and strengthening the capacities of the Council. Further, a window was opened to resume negotiation with Sida on two projects that had been halted: the Sahel and the Drive for Democracy projects. CODESRIA was asked to develop an action plan that specified the necessary reforms and a roadmap to address them. It is against this action plan that Sida intends to conduct an appraisal of the Council in preparation to opening a conversation on possible funding for the new Strategic Planning Cycle 2023–2027. This action plan has since been elaborated and reviewed, and implementation has recently begun. Meantime, since the Council has been operating under a no-cost extension in 2022, negotiations commenced for a cost-extension that would allow the Council to address a range of issues that had stalled in 2021.

During the audit period, the Council's programming came to a standstill for three main reasons. The first was the suspension of disbursement of funds starting in April 2021. This froze disbursement of funds to the Council completely, except for emergencies. It must be recalled that Sida was the sole partner providing core funding to CODESRIA in the 2017–2021 strategic planning cycle. Indeed, the last Evaluation Report of the Council referred to above noted that Sida provided 63 per cent of funding to CODESRIA during the cycle. With the audit going on, and the suspension of disbursement, the Council's core programmes inevitably ground to a halt.

The second reason is the uncertainty that the audit process generated. Precisely because disbursement could be triggered only by an emergency, financial planning was impossible since disbursement was contingent and therefore unpredictable. This did not allow the Council to effectively execute its 2021 Work Plan. Numerous activities were postponed due to this, among them the 16th CODESRIA General Assembly originally scheduled for December 2021 and the strategic planning process.

Three, the audit also constrained the Council from fundraising from other partners, some of whom opted to defer negotiations until the Sida process was completed. This only worsened the financial health of the Council and seriously undermined its operations. Fortunately, the Council has other funding partners whose resources nicely complement Sida's support. The lim-

ited activities the Council has been able to run during the one-and-a-half years of audit were drawn from resources from these funding partners. The Council attempted to expand its resource mobilisation activities and was able to commence discussions with three possible partners. However, one of them was undergoing a comprehensive internal reform process and was unable to enter any new agreement during the reform period. The other new partner decided to conduct due diligence preparatory to entering any agreement. As stated above, they deferred negotiations until the Sida process was completed. They explained that the audit was key to their decision-making. Thus, when they decided to shadow the audit process, awaiting its results before taking a decision, CODESRIA understood. But in the end, the delays persisted for close to one year. The final potential funding partner is currently considering CODESRIA's proposal for possible funding effective from 2023.

Though the Council has gone through this rough experience, the commitment of staff at the Secretariat and the creativity they have brought to their work has kept the Council visible and active. The Council was able to conclude the 2017–2021 Meaning-Making Research Initiative (MRI) research contracts on schedule. Most of the work has been published or is scheduled for publication soon. Given the speed in processing journal articles, for instance, the Council has established space on the website where ready articles awaiting allocation to a journal volume are deposited. The Training, Grants and Fellowships Programme was able to transition Institutes and related activities to virtual platforms and run the Gender, Democratic Governance and Summer Institutes virtually since 2021. This transition began partly as a response to the limitations imposed by the pandemic but quickly adjusted to accommodate the resource constraints at that time.

The Council took advantage of the restrictions imposed by the pandemic to focus on revitalising CODESRIA's publications. This programme had a serious backlog, publications had been delayed, and there was a general inability to effectively communicate with members of the community interested in publishing with CODESRIA. In March 2020, a strategy was initiated to deal with the backlog, to improve on quality and to instill efficiency and consistency in the work of the programme. The peer-review process was revisited and improved, record-keeping and archiving were strengthened, while dissemination and communication were accorded renewed attention. The Council also strengthened and professionalised manu-

script production processes. This helped to resolve the backlog with our key journals and brought them up to date. We are especially proud of *Africa Development*, which is fully up to date. As former Managing Editor, Suleiman Adebawale, argued twenty years ago (and this remains true today), “*Africa Development*, one single CODESRIA journal, has published more African authors than all the combined three non-Africa-based journals” that he studied.

The Council set up a new website, created several platforms for manuscript submission and processing, membership application and an online bookshop. CODESRIA manuscripts are now submitted, processed and archived online. The new website has grown into a window through which CODESRIA can be easily accessed. There is active communication through the website and other social media platforms and a dedicated team ensures that members remain fully updated. Having resolved the issue of speed, regularity and quality of publications, this has consequently created enough relevant content to share with the community. Thus, there is consistent notification to members about new or forthcoming publications. The speed, consistency and efficiency of the production, dissemination and communications process are restoring the brand and visibility of the Council.

These initiatives seem to have masked from view the difficulties the Council has experienced since 2021 and the accumulated 2016 problems that have persistently haunted the 2017–2021 programmatic cycle. In the course of 2022, there were repeated complaints, shared publicly, that suggest that the Council had intentionally refused to support different activities that it used to support earlier. Other complaints claimed, wrongly and by cherry-picking what to remember, that the Council intentionally refused to

pay outstanding benefits owed to staff who left the Council in 2016–2017. In most of these cases, those who complained preferred to individualise the issue while deliberately ignoring the overall context the Council has operated under since 2017. Indeed, some who have complained have adequate knowledge of the context referenced here. The Secretariat has directly communicated with them and shared detailed explanations about the challenges we have experienced while making measured commitments to when we anticipate these challenges will be resolved. This context started with a multitude of inherited audit challenges in 2017. In all, between 2017 and 2022, the Council has undergone a combined total of fourteen evaluations, audits and special studies.

It is the commitment of the CODESRIA Secretariat not to conduct the administrative and management affairs of the Council on social media platforms. But the silence of the Secretariat cannot be treated as confirmation of guilt. With the completion of the Sida audit, the positive overall verdict and the re-opening of partnership discussions with several funding partners, the Council has been able to resume the partnership with Sida and to bring Norad on board as a new funding partner. Additional discussions with other potential partners are underway and will be formally announced in due course. I write to assure members that the future of CODESRIA and its programmes remains positive. The CODESRIA Secretariat plans to recover the time lost, launch the new strategic plan, and initiate the accompanying programme cycle and convene the 16th General Assembly once modalities for a new support system are concluded.

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